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A Ministry of Truth

By Joshua Lederberg

"JOSHUA, WHAT have you done for peace this year?" Leo Szilard would ask me. He was one of my most cherished friends, but I would have to wince in expectation of his admonition. We

Science
and
Man

scientists are particularly concerned with what we might leave behind us. All would vanish in the same nuclear conflagration as the rest of human achievement if we do not find a way to stay the conflict of world power.

We may be no better statesmen than other citizens, but we should constantly seek some technical innovation to contribute to human survival.

THE MOST LIKELY way for nuclear catastrophe to occur is through a miscalculation of the other side's intentions and policy. So long as communications are clear and time allows thoughtful analysis, any escalation of a conflict toward the use of nuclear weapons will remain fearful and constrained, and therefore reversible.

Let us once panic, or the enemy conclude that we have reached the point of rage, and it will provoke the same reaction on both sides: "We must take the ultimate chance, get them before they get us." At such a point, the fate of the earth may depend on proving that our policy is only defensive.

Plenty of precedent shows the importance of miscalculation in starting major conflicts. Before World War I, the Kaiser was all too con-

vincing in an inflated show of German military power, and he deeply misapprehended the Czar's policy of Pan-Slavism. Hitler was astonished when the British really did react over Poland.

Some mechanism to divine the truth of a nation's policy would therefore be of incalculable benefit to man's hope of survival. Truth is a novel principle in politics; we have so little experience of it that it would be hard to predict all of its ramifications. But it could save us from the ultimate catastrophes, which should be enough reason to promote it.

Such an environment might also solidify fundamentally peaceful policies. These would be more advantageous when it was possible to prove them to the other parties.

IT WOULD BE too revolutionary to suggest that a country always tell the truth, nor can we immediately impose truth-telling on our adversaries. Nevertheless, unilateral initiatives could transform the future. Political institutions might suffice by the pervasive assimilation of foreign policy into internal, domestic law to make it administratively too cumbersome to violate a treaty. This is a simple extrapolation of the concept of self-inspection, but it would require much civil restraint on the President's authority.

We could establish an official Ministry of Truth whose lawful function was to know the truth about our national policy and immediate plans. The minister would, however, speak only when licensed by the President to make an ex cathedra statement on a crucial, solemn occasion. It

would be difficult starting from now to make the minister's independent responsibility wholly credible.

We therefore set a truth machine as an objective of psychobiological research. To extract the truth from a human being is an awesome goal, and it would be inconsistent with our image of human dignity to disable him from lying. However, only the official staff need be obligated to submit to the device.

Technically, the machine should not be as difficult to perfect as it would be to establish the supporting institutions. Lie detectors and narcoanalysis (truth "serum") are steps in this direction, but far from perfect.

We do know, however, that direct electrical stimulation of the brain can elicit or inhibit speech. We should then be able to learn how to make a cooperative subject tell what he knows, and it is the minister's job to cooperate with the machine.

Once such a system becomes available, it should coordinate the bureaucratic techniques needed to assure that the truth minister does have the relevant information, and can truthfully say that none has been denied him. Indeed when it became firm policy to open this avenue to the truth, it might never or rarely be necessary to invoke the machine itself.

The truth would then be available to the President as another weapon of national policy for world peace. The technical problem is merely to achieve such a level of credibility that when the truth is invoked other nations could rely upon it in making their own plans.

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